

Sports

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Basketball: Lady Panthers stun No. 4 Fannin County, 48-45

Six first-half 3s spark Union County during 49-37 win at Murphy, NC

By Todd Forrest
Sports Editor
tforrest@nganews.com

The Lady Panthers (6-5) enter the Christmas break fresh off consecutive wins, headlined by a dramatic come-from-behind victory over fourth-ranked Fannin County on Friday night in Blairsville.

Union County took care of business at Murphy, North Carolina on Saturday, never trailing in a 49-37 road win.

Union County will return to action on Dec. 28 at Towns County's Battle of the States Christmas Tournament, where they face Polk County, Tennessee in round one. Region 8-AA action gets underway on Jan. 6 when Union County visits Athens Academy.

Lady Panthers 48, No. 4 Fannin County 45 - Union County knocked off its highest-ranked opponent in over a decade (No. 3 Fannin County in 2011), surging past the Lady Rebels via a 7-0 run over the final 90 seconds.

Along with their Dec. 9 win at then-No. 8 Towns, the Lady Panthers collected two victories over ranked opponents in one week, helping Union County climb above .500 for the first time since 2-1.

"This win means so much to me as a senior," Corinne Hill said after the Fannin game. "The last few times we played them, even last year at home, it didn't go very well. But tonight we came together as a team, played hard for four quarters and never gave up, and that means so much."

Asked where the Fannin win ranks among her most memorable high school games, Hill placed it near the top.

"This is probably one of the top-three," she said, pausing to think for a moment. Yes, definitely in the top-three."

The Lady Panthers entered the contest without head coach Brad Cochran, who earned an ejection during the girls' JV game earlier in the day. As a result, assistant Haylie Blalock notched her first career coaching win against Class AA's No. 4 program.

"We talked about playing with a purpose before the game and they did just that against a rival," Blalock said. "They did what they needed to do and went out there and took care of business."

The Lady Panthers clawed back from a late 41-35 deficit behind 11 fourth-quarter points from sophomore Ariel McCarter, who finished the night with 17 points, 10 rebounds and six assists.

Still trailing 45-41 with 1:30 left, sophomore Katelyn Brown split two free throws to ignite Union's game-clinching 7-0 run. Union's full-court pressure forced a turnover when McCarter swiped a pass at midcourt, but a tie-up returned possession to the Rebels with 1:13 to play.

Fannin missed from 3-point range, and McCarter immediately attacked the basket, drawing a foul with 33 seconds on the clock - hitting 1 of 2 and moving Union within a basket at 45-43.

Junior Lara Turner jumped in front of a pass near the Rebels' bench, and the Lady Panthers quickly went the other way, where McCarter gathered a Kamryn Mull miss and knocked down a jumper to



Former teammates and classmates, Corinne Hill (14) and Ellie Cook, go head-to-head one final time. Photo/Todd Forrest

Cook and Reigan O'Neal shot a combined 2 for 17 with 8 points and nine fouls.

Two weeks removed from a one-sided 47-21 defeat in Blue Ridge on Dec. 2, Union County fell into an early 10-3 deficit on Friday night but responded by outscoring Fannin 19-11, closing the half with a 22-21 lead.

Down 10-3, the Lady Panthers rattled off a 9-0 run with baskets by Warren and Mull, followed by two free throws and a go-ahead trey from McCarter.

Fannin opened the second with five straight to mount a 15-12 advantage, but Union continuously answered each run with one of its own. The Lady Panthers used a 10-2 run to build its largest lead at 22-17, beginning with a jumper from Turner.

Hill scored six-in-a-row, then a Turner free throw awarded Union its 5-point lead with 1:48 before halftime. But Fannin closed the second frame with a pair of buckets -- a steal-and-score, and then a deuce with 7 seconds left.

McCarter started the third with a basket, but the Rebels used an 8-0 run to mount a 29-24 lead near the 5-minute mark. McCarter and Mull tied things up at 29-29, and Warren scored inside to hand Union a 31-30 advantage with 3:55 left in the period.

Tied at 33-33 following a Turner jumper, Fannin closed the frame with a 5-0 spurt to take a 38-33 lead into the fourth. McCarter started the fourth with a mid-range jumper, but the Rebels extended their margin to 41-35 at the 6:30 mark.

McCarter scored on consecutive trips, and Turner split two free throws to narrow the deficit to 41-40 with 3:13 remaining. A Hill free throw kept Union within a basket at 43-41 until Fannin made it 45-41 just shy of the 2-minute mark.

Team stats: The Lady Panthers hit 27% from the floor on 15-of-55 shooting overall. Union made 1 of 12 (8%) from deep and 17 for 26 (65%) at the line. Fannin finished 15 for 56 (26%), 7 of 30 (23%) from deep and 8 for 11 (73%) at the

many tries over a defending region/conference champion.

"It's been an experience for sure, but you just have to roll with the punches," Blalock said after the Murphy game. "The girls have stepped up and played their hearts out so it's really been all them."

When asked if she's ready to retire undefeated, Blalock laughed and thanked Coach Cochran for his support.

"I don't know, I'll have to think about it and see how it goes," she answered jokingly. "But Coach Cochran has been so supportive from afar. The girls played for him and for themselves and I'm just super proud of them."

It was all Union after a 3-3 start, hitting six 3s en route to a 15-10 edge after one and



Union County interim coach Haylie Blalock's resume already includes a 1-0 record vs. ranked teams and a 2-0 mark vs. defending region/conference champions. Photo/Todd Forrest

Union controlled the boards 46-30 and out-rebounded the Rebels 18-10 on the offensive glass. Fannin County outscored the Lady Panthers 14-8 in the paint, while Union held a 9-3 edge on second-chance points. Despite a flurry of late miscues, Fannin won the turnover battle, committing 14 and forcing 19. Additionally, Fannin led 15-7 in points off turnovers.

The Lady Rebels (7-3, 3-0) bounced back on Saturday with a 78-24 thrashing at Gordon Central (3-6, 0-3) in Region 7-AA competition.

Lady Panthers 49, Murphy, NC 37 - Blalock, who grew up nearby in Hiwassee Dam, NC, guided Union County to a perfect weekend with her second victory in as

many tries over a defending region/conference champion.

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a 29-16 lead at the break. McCarter finished with 17 points, and Mull had 11 to lead the way on Saturday.

On top 37-26 through three quarters, the Lady Panthers built a 42-26 advantage courtesy of Warren's 3-point play, capping off five straight from the junior post.

McCarter made 3 of 4 over two trips to the line to maintain a comfortable 45-30 lead at the 5-minute mark until the Bulldogs rattled off a 7-0 run to remain in the hunt with 3:30 left. But with no shot clock in the Tarheel State, Union began playing keep-away before Mull sank 1 of 2 at the line at the 1:17 mark.

Mull hit another free throw with 42 seconds remaining, and McCarter went 2 for 2 on the next possession for a 49-37 final.

Mull started the game with a 3-pointer - the first of her three first-half treys. Later, McCarter and Mull each connected from downtown to help build an 11-5 edge less than 5 minutes into the contest. After McCarter's second trey made it 20-12, Turner got in on the 3-point barrage -- making it a 24-15 game. Mull capped the first-half scoring with a three to provide a 29-16 halftime cushion.

Turner finished with 9 points; Warren had six, Brown added 4 points and Hill scored two.

No team stats were available for Saturday's win.

Up next: Union County faces Polk County, TN at Towns County's Battle of the States Christmas Tourney. Tip-off is slated for 1 p.m. on Dec. 28. The Wildcats sport a 6-2 record as of this writing.

Both Union County teams will participate in BOTS for the first time since 2019. Hill is the only current player on either squad with tourney experience, entering all three contests as a freshman during the Lady Panthers' third-place finish.

2022 28th Annual CHRISTMAS TOURNAMENT BATTLE OF THE STATES

DEC 28-29-30, 2022

CONSOLATION BRACKET

DAY 3 12/30/22

9 10:00 AM

10 1:00 PM

W5 W6

GIRLS

DAY 1 12/28/22

Franklin High, NC

1 10:00 AM

Murphy High, NC

2 1:00 PM

Union Co., GA

Rabun Co., GA

3 4:00 PM

Hayesville High, NC

4 7:00 PM

Coosa High, GA

Towns Co., GA

10 1:00 PM

WINNERS BRACKET

DAY 2 12/29/22

7 4:00 PM

DAY 3 12/30/22

12 7:00 PM CHAMPION

8 7:00 PM

11 4:00 PM

L7 L8

3rd Place

Bottom Team in Bracket is Home Team and Will Wear White Uniforms

and knocked down a jumper to

Basketball: Panthers take care of business vs. Fannin, at Murphy, NC

By Todd Forrest
Sports Editor
sports@nganews.com

Union County (6-4) took both meetings from a pair of neighbors over the weekend, using a 22-0 second-half run to finish off Fannin County in a 62-42 win and leading wire-to-wire in Saturday's 58-49 victory at Murphy, North Carolina.

Last Tuesday's off-day provided the Panthers and head coach Corey Garrett their first full week of practice since the football players' return. As a result, the previous week was something Garrett circled on his calendar at the start of the season.

"We were able to work on a lot of special situations, and I think you saw a little bit more comfort in the [players'] eyes," he said. "I think we were a little more settled and we've matured a lot. Fannin didn't change as much on defense as they usually do, but Murphy changed defenses a lot and we were able to seamlessly flow from a man offense to a zone offense."

Union County has won five of six and begins preparation for Towns County's Battle of the States Christmas Tourney on Dec. 28 vs. Polk County, Tennessee.

Panthers 62, Fannin County 42 - Sophomore Houston Henry poured in a career-high 20 points with four steals on 7-of-14 shooting during Union's blowout victory on Friday night.

Tied 30-30 with 5:09 to play in the third, the Panthers pulled away courtesy of a 22-0 outburst, eventually building a 52-30 fourth-quarter advantage. Union County's onslaught began with a pull-up jumper by sophomore Jude Ellis, followed by senior Eli Underwood's 3-point play. Sophomore Hayden Hughes connected from long distance, and Henry drilled back-to-back treys for a 44-30 score at the quarter's 3-minute mark.

"Houston [Henry] is doing a much better job, not that he ever did a bad job, of understanding more of the offense and what we want based off different looks," Garrett said.

Underwood scored the final five points of the third, and the Panthers took a comfortable 49-30 lead into the fourth. Ellis hit two free throws to start the final frame, and Henry made 1 of 2 to open up a 52-30 lead.

Buckets by freshman Cade Dockrey, sophomore Maddox Young and Underwood kept the margin at 58-37 just past the period's halfway point. Dockrey hit two more free throws and scored via a dribble drive to bring the final tally to 62-42.

The Panthers jumped out to a 6-0 lead within 50 seconds courtesy of Young's 3-point play off the opening tip and Ellis' triple. Young made it an 8-2 game before Fannin knotted the score with 4:42 left in the first.

Underwood drilled a trey, but the Rebels capped a 12-3 run with a 14-11 advantage.



Sophomore point guard Houston Henry attracts three Fannin County defenders in the paint before dishing off to Eli Underwood for a layup. Henry scored a career-high 20 vs. the Rebels. Photo/Todd Forrest

Down 18-16, the Panthers pushed ahead by quarter's end via a Young free throw and a Henry steal that led to a Dockrey layup.

A Henry steal-and-score and Kaden Combs' 3-point play extended the Union lead to 26-22. Henry hit two free throws and then scored at the rim in the final seconds, turning a 26-25 edge into a 30-25 halftime lead.

Garrett admits that he sometimes winces at the amount of punishment Henry takes during his relentless drives to the basket. However, Garrett added that he doesn't want to rein in Henry's aggressiveness because that's what makes the Union point guard such a special player.

"Yeah, he kind of worries me, but to be honest, that's just how he is," Garrett said. "He's a tireless worker, he's fearless and I would never want to take that away from him. So honestly, I just give him the keys and let him go."

Underwood finished with 13 points and eight rebounds; Dockrey and Young had 8 points apiece. Ellis scored 7 points; Hughes added 3 points and five rebounds; Combs had 3 points and three boards.

Henry finished with a +22 plus-minus (PM). Fannin's Joseph Annis led the Rebels with 12 points and 14 rebounds.

Team stats: Union County went 22 of 54 (41%) from the floor, shot 5 for 22 (23%) from deep and 13 of 23 (57%) at the line. Fannin made 17 of 57 (30%) overall, 2 of 21 (10%) from 3-point range and 6 of 13 (46%) at the charity stripe.

Fannin out-rebounded Union 38-34 overall and 13-8 on the offensive glass. The Rebels outscored Union 13-4 on second chances, but points-in-paint were even at 30-30. The Panthers forced 17 turnovers and committed 14. They led points-off-turnovers 17-9.

Panthers 58, Murphy,

NC 49 - Ellis scored 17 points, handed out three assists and added two steals as Union County led start-to-finish in Saturday night's rematch vs. the Bulldogs.

"It was nice to win both games of a back-to-back, and it helped that we were able to get our starters off the floor a little early the night before vs. Fannin," Garrett said. "We knew it would be a hostile environment on Saturday. None of our guys have ever played at Murphy before so we tried to get them ready for the moment."

Union jumped out to another 6-0 lead en route to a 30-18 halftime score. Ellis and Underwood combined for 17 of the Panthers' 30 first-half points, while early foul trouble on a pair of Murphy starters limited the home team.

With under 30 seconds until the break, Ellis scored on Union's final two first-half possessions, opening up some breathing room with a 12-point advantage.

"You definitely started to see some of things we've been working on during the week at Murphy," Garrett said. "It was nice to see those things develop and then to go over there and lead wire-to-wire, that was really cool."

The Bulldogs kept chipping away in the second half, but Union County answered each time. Ahead 31-25 following a Murphy spurt, an Ellis three followed by Rader's and-one quickly stretched the lead to 37-25.

The Bulldogs trimmed the margin to 39-31 later in the frame until a triple from Hughes gave the visitors a 42-31 edge after three. Murphy opened the fourth with four straight but missed two free throws at the 6:29 mark.

Once again, the Panthers retaliated when Rader knocked down a 3-pointer, followed by dribble-drives from Ellis and Young.

Still on top 52-44 with



Sophomore Maddox Young (bottom) fights for a loose ball during a physical contest at Murphy, North Carolina on Saturday night. Union enters the Christmas break with a 6-4 record. Photo/Todd Forrest

under 2 minutes left, Underwood's fast-break putback made it a 10-point game, but Murphy immediately moved within a half-dozen at 55-49 inside of one minute.

Ellis split two free throws, making it a 3-possession game with 28 seconds left, then Hughes put the finishing touches on the victory with a late layup.

Underwood added 12 points, six boards and two steals. Henry had 8 points, six

boards, three assists and two steals. Young scored 7 points, pulled down four rebounds, dished out two assists a recorded two steals.

Rader chipped in 6 points and Hughes scored five. Dockrey had a game-high four steals and 3 points.

Henry and Dockrey both finished at +11 PM.

Murphy's Zach Skogen turned in a monster performance with 19 points, 20 rebounds and four assists.

Team stats: Union County hit 20 of 44 (46%) from the field, 5 of 10 (50%) from deep and 13 of 25 (52%) at the line. Murphy made 37% (19 for 52) of its shot attempts, 13% (3 for 23) of its 3-point tries and 53% (8 for 15) of its free throws.

The Bulldogs controlled the glass 38-25 and held an 18-10 edge on the offensive boards. Second chance points went to Murphy 14-9, as did points-in-the-paint at 30-24. Union County forced 21 turnovers and committed 13. The Panthers held a 21-11 margin in points-off-turnovers.

Up next: The Panthers meet Polk County, Tennessee in the opening round of the Battle of the States Christmas Tourney. The 7-3 Wildcats are under the direction of head coach Jon Tucker, son of former Union County head coach David Tucker.

"You know that a Tucker-coached team is going to shoot it, and if they get hot, all you can do is try to weather the storm," Garrett said. "You know they're going to get hot at some point so you have to focus on the little things. You can't give up offensive rebounds and turn the ball over."

"It's going to be a cool experience for our guys [playing in their first Battle of the States]. They all grew up watching it and they've all heard stories about it their whole lives. I'm really excited for them to finally get the opportunity to play in it."

Union County and Polk County, TN will tip at 2:30 p.m. on Dec. 28 at Towns County.

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DEC 28-29-30, 2022

CONSOLATION BRACKET

DAY 1
12/28/22

DAY 2
12/29/22

DAY 3
12/30/22

BOYS

Franklin High, NC

Murphy High, NC

Polk Co., TN

Union Co., GA

Rabun Co., GA

Hayesville High, NC

Coosa High, GA

Towns Co., GA

WINNERS BRACKET

DAY 2
12/29/22

DAY 3
12/30/22

12 8:30 PM
CHAMPION

3rd Place

W5 10 2:30 PM W6 Bottom Team in Bracket is Home Team and Will Wear White Uniforms L7 L8

Wrestling: Union County 13th out of 37 teams at Berkmar's Gorilla Warfare

By Todd Forrest
Sports Editor
sports@nganews.com

Lilburn - Union County (78 points) finished a half-point back of 12th-place Bremen and 3 points better than 14th-place Newton at Berkmar's Gorilla Warfare IX tournament over the weekend.

Union County senior Shelby Agacinski took home first in the girls' 155-lb weight class, pinning Berkmar's Fevin Coleman in the finals.

Sophomore Asa Smith-Foot placed third at 150 lbs, falling in the semifinals to eventual champion Jace Parent of St. Francis. Smith-Foot went on to pin Newton's Landyn Camp in the consolation finals.

Brooke Kennedy came in third in the girls' 190+ division, pinning Peachtree Ridge's Jewelian Lunceford in 19 seconds during the consolation finals.

At 138 lbs, junior Anderson Clouse dropped his quarterfinal bout to eventual champion Antione Glasgow of Parkview. Clouse would go on to finish fourth, reaching the consolation finals.

Junior David Heredia placed sixth at 175 lbs, suffering a second-round loss to Loganville senior Michael Turner. Heredia battled through the consols, eventually advancing to the fifth-place bout.

Other wrestlers included junior Zander Rotko, who won three of his first four matches at 144 lbs. Sophomore Payton Legatt also took three of his



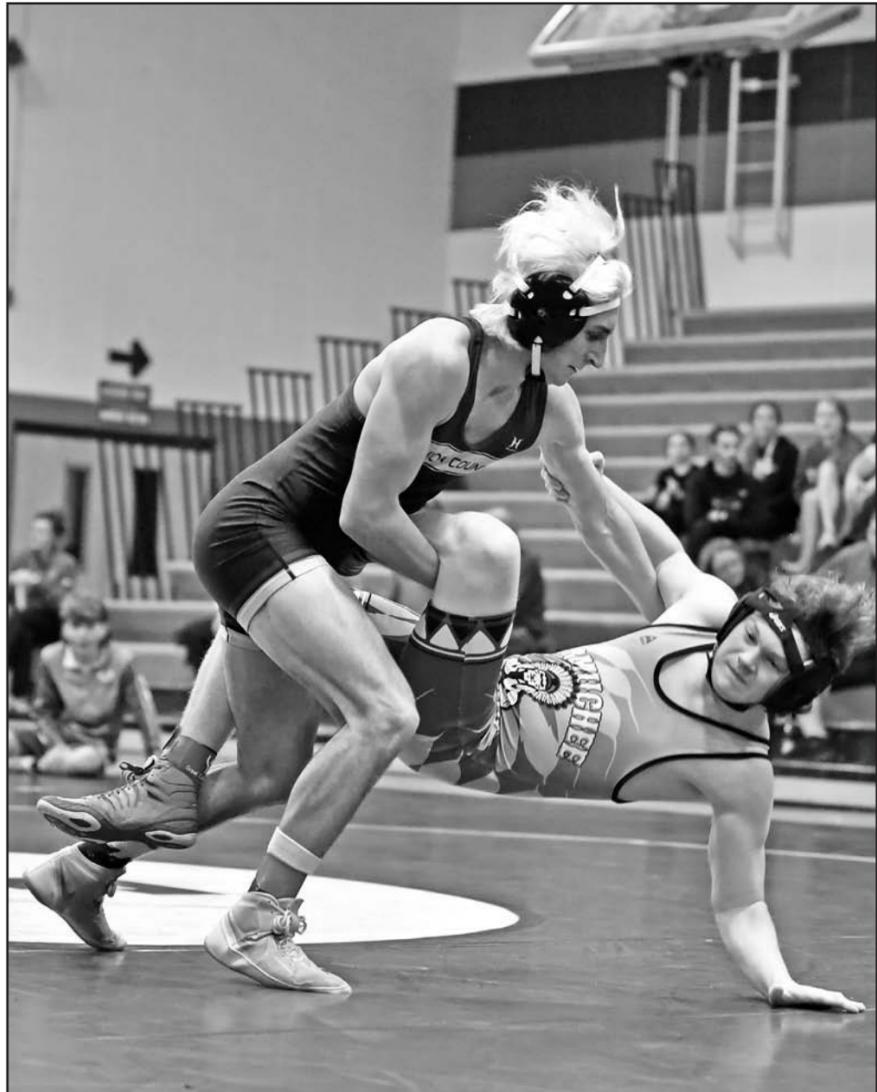
Senior Shelby Agacinski placed first at Berkmar. Photo/Jeremy Foster

first four at 165. Senior Huck Whisenhunt won his first bout at 175 before dropping into the consols, where he won two more matches. Senior Damon Wallace came out on top in his first 150-lb consolation match.

Union County senior Colson Lotts also competed at 144 lbs.

In the JV tournament, 8th grader Paxon Legatt placed first at 144 lbs. Thomas Gary (126) took home third, Titus Conley (165) and Riley Montenson (120) each came in sixth.

In other action, the Panthers varsity defeated Armuchee 47-21 in a duals match at Fannin County on Tuesday.



Union County junior Zander Rotko (left) scores a takedown during his match at last Tuesday's 47-21 duals victory over Armuchee at Fannin County. Photo/Todd Forrest